

Interviewee: Alois (Al) Kopp

Interviewer: Thomas Saylor

Date of interview: 6 November 2002

Location of interview: dining room of the Kopp home in Minnetonka, MN

Transcribed by: Linda Gerber, December 2002

Edited by: Thomas Saylor, completed July 2003

Alois (Al) Kopp was born on 3 May 1918 on a 640 acre farm near Raleigh, North Dakota. The fourth oldest of ten children of ethnic German immigrants from Russia, Al attended local schools, graduating from Raleigh High School in 1936. Al spent a year in a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp, but he dreamed of becoming a doctor; without the means to pursue this goal, in September 1937 he enlisted in the US Navy.

Al went to a number of Navy technical schools after Basic Training, including medical tech, dental tech, and pharmacology. In 1939, now a dental technician, he was stationed on the cruiser USS *Houston* (CA-30), then in the Philippines. Al was on *Houston* when war broke out in December 1941, and he remained on the ship until she was sunk by Japanese aircraft off Indonesia on 1 March 1942.

For Al, the next forty-two months were spent as a POW of the Japanese, in camps in the Dutch Indies (Serang, Bicycle Camp, Changi jail), Burma (in the jungle, on railroad construction crews), and Vietnam (Saigon). Like all POWs, Al endured malnutrition, mistreatment, and disease; he calls his survival "a matter of luck." Following liberation in September 1945, Al spent several months in the hospital and on convalescent leave, got married (1946, wife Helen Jones), and served at duty stations in Minneapolis (1946) and Chicago (1946-47). He was discharged in December 1947 with the rank of warrant officer.

In civilian life, Al had a career in auto and farm equipment sales; after brief sojourns to Aberdeen, South Dakota, and Bismarck, North Dakota, Al and Helen made their home in Minnetonka, Minnesota, where they remained after retirement.

Contents: pages 3-18, childhood in North Dakota, Navy life, race relations; 18-22, sinking of the *Houston*, 1 Mar 1942; 22-40, POW experience and postwar adjustment



Cruiser USS *Houston* (CA-30) off San Diego, California, in 1935.

Source: US Navy, Photo # NH 53582

Interview Key:

T = Thomas Saylor

A = Alois Kopp

[text] = words added by editor, either for clarification or explanation

(*) = words or phrase unclear**

NOTE: interview has been edited for clarity

Tape 1, Side A. Counter begins at 000.

T: This is an interview for the POW Oral History Project. My name is Thomas Saylor. Today is the 6th of November 2002, and this is an interview with Al Kopp of Minnetonka, Minnesota. First, Al, on the record, thanks very much for taking time to speak with me today. We've been talking a little bit now off tape, and what follows is some of what I've learned. You were born on 3 May 1918 in Raleigh, North Dakota, which is a little south of Bismarck.

A: That's right.

T: You were the fourth oldest of eleven children. Your parents were both German immigrants coming to this country around the turn of the century. Did they know each other when they came to this country?

A: They kind of grew up together but they came four years apart. So they remembered each other. When they got room on the next ship they came on.

T: You attended schools in Raleigh and graduated from high school there in 1936.

A: That's correct.

T: How large was your high school graduating class?

A: Six. Three boys and three girls.

T: You weren't fielding any more teams than a chess team maybe.

A: We had a basketball team.

T: Everybody had to play, didn't they?

A: Everybody played, and I was the center. I was the tallest kid. Six foot.

T: After high school you went to a CCC Camp.

A: That's right.

T: Where was that camp?

A: They moved us around quite a bit. It started out in Bismarck and then we had choices. They moved different groups to California. I went to Wyoming. Teton Mountains. Then Utah. Then Idaho. Then I ran into the Navy recruiters.

T: Now we've talked to a number of fellows who were in CC Camps over the years and you're the first person I've talked to that really moved around a lot with the CC Camps. Really got outside of North Dakota there.

A: Oh, yes. That's true. My oldest brother was in the camps. He got out of North Dakota eventually a little bit. But we moved. We moved around a lot from park to park.

T: What kind of experience was that for you? You were there for a little more than a year you said.

A: It was about fourteen months. Yes. It was a good experience. When you're a kid you go for anything different. It was beautiful country where we went. North Dakota was always pretty treeless. We went to the mountains right away. That's some kind of experience to see the beautiful pine trees and like that after coming from poplar trees and Missouri River bottom. I shouldn't descry that too bad, because I always liked North Dakota. North Dakota has a lot of beauty too. But it was a different experience if you're seventeen.

T: You were just eighteen I guess.

A: Just eighteen.

T: What kind of work were you doing in the CC Camps?

A: We were set up to make parks. We made beautiful parks like the Peace Garden in North Dakota. Some of the people were there. We did the Teton Range in Wyoming and Idaho. We did a lot. Pretty parks.

T: Mostly physical labor? Building, constructing things?

A: Yes. The Forestry Department ran the outside work. I always wanted to be a doctor and I go right back to them and I was a medic. Right away I went to work for the doctor. Had sick calls and when big things came up we took them to the nearest town and operated on them. Like appendicitis was probably the biggest thing that happened.

T: What was the most memorable thing for you about your time in the CC Camps?

A: The most memorable thing was getting regular meals and good meals. We were poor farm kids. You get lots of food but you don't always eat right. The first thing most of us did was gain fifteen, twenty pounds.

T: Is that right? And you too?

A: Yes. My brother. Same way. That's probably the most memorable. We always had plenty to eat at home, but it wasn't the right kind of food. This was kind of Army food. I think the Navy food was better.

T: Al, was life in these CC Camps regimented?

A: Not very. We were sort of required to do morning exercises. If you weren't out making dams and parks. You had an exercise program and they weren't very strict about it because they didn't want to be military. The kids objected. Nobody wanted to be in the Army. It was well run. Disciplined. There was no booze there. Of course nobody ever heard of dope then.

T: What was the general attitude of the people that you were around in the camps? Were people happy to be there or were they frustrated...?

A: For the most part they were happy. Some kids at those ages got homesick. Never experienced anything like that. I'd say ninety percent of them came from large families. I sure did. I missed my brothers and sisters. I still remember that pretty vividly. I was just homesick as hell. And I was still content where I was. There was plenty to eat and they gave you clothes.

T: Was that the first time you had been away from home?

A: The very first time.

T: What was that like for you? Being away from home suddenly after being with a large family...

A: I just mentioned it. Lots of homesick. Having to adjust to living with other young guys. You learn, and sometimes you learn painfully, because you have to adjust to, adapt to the new surroundings. To people. There's all kinds of people as you know. It took a while. It wasn't like family life. You naturally adjust to family I guess. It was different. But I think it was a great experience. It sure helped me after I got in the Navy and had to really get in line with the discipline.

(1, A, 120)

T: In a sense it sounds almost like a step along...

A: Kind of.

T: It wasn't the service, but it wasn't home either.

A: It was a transfer over to another level, like they say in sports. Yes. It was a learning experience. And not a bad one. It wasn't bad.

T: You mentioned growing up on the farm. Did you grow up on a farm in North Dakota?

A: Yes.

T: What do you remember about life on a farm in North Dakota in the 1930s?

A: I remember a lot of wind and blowing. You remember a lot of things about that in the 1930s. I remember we were scrounging for food. Although I said it before, we never starved. But we were always short of good, healthy food. I remember work that I didn't like. I never wanted to be a farmer.

T: What turned you off to that? What kind of things on the farm?

A: I looked around and I couldn't see a farmer that was making any money. Or making a decent living. It just was impossible. Some people were living on welfare. Franklin D. Roosevelt had his programs. And my folks were German and pretty proud of themselves. They wouldn't take any of that stuff. I didn't like that. I thought I would take some. When you're a kid you just don't care. That's what I remember. Being poor and working hard and not having the facilities to do the work like milking cows and all the farm work there is. Now there's farming. That's another story all together.

T: How many acres did your folks have?

A: Usually in North Dakota they farmed big acreages. It just takes a lot because the per acre production is not that great. Nothing like Minnesota. I'd say we had up to a section and section and a half of land. Six hundred forty acres.

T: That is larger than an average Minnesota farm. That's for sure.

A: Minnesota hasn't got anything near that unless you have these big corporation farms.

T: Yes. And in those days we hear a lot of 160 acre farms.

A: Yes. And producing enough for most families to live. Maybe they'd take issue with that nowadays because the cost of farming has gone up so terribly.

T: Yes. What did your folks raise on that farm?

A: They were raised on a farm in southern Russia. They were German.

T: But from Russia?

A: They were in the—geography has nothing, not the geography, but the countries have changed so much since then. They were actually in Bessarabia, which was under Russian control. As was Romania. Northern Romania, which is all changed now.

Y: Yes. What kind of crops did they raise here in the States?

A: We raised cattle. We ran on the range. And we raised wheat. Predominantly wheat. Flax. Oats. Corn. Not much corn. The season isn't long enough in North Dakota for good corn. Flax we raised quite a bit.

T: What about the farm itself? What happened to that? Did your folks stay on the farm until they retired?

A: They stayed on the farm until they retired. Then they moved to Bismarck. And the farm was sold.

T: So it's not in your family anymore?

A: No. The farm is gone. Not gone. It's in other hands. None of the kids wanted to be a farmer.

T: That's interesting. You had a number of brothers who one could imagine might have taken it. Nobody wanted it?

A: Living was just too hard. Nowadays it would be a different story. I'm thinking we would have had... all the boys [would have] wanted the farm.

T: So none of your brothers stayed on the farm.

(1, A, 180)

A: We couldn't wait to get off of the farm. There's no future. Dead end.

T: Did you get that impression from your folks, too, that it was a hard life or a no-future life?

A: Yes. And the Germans being German they accept those things sooner because they had even tougher times than that where they came from.

T: Southern Russia. Yes.

A: So it was the same type of work but they had even less implements for instance. Or less horses. They just accepted it. Maybe that's true of all European immigrants from those years. They were so (***) for the future like all the politicians were saying recently. That's what we go for. I don't know. It seems to me like all my forebears they were kind of satisfied and content with: this is our station in life and you accept it. Americans don't think like that.

T: You think your folks were like that? That they were satisfied with what they had?

A: Yes. Certainly. And sometimes I think it just transferred down to us. Because, not that we wanted it, but that we were forced into it. Their thinking. Like the older children. My older two brothers, they never even got to go to high school. They hardly got through the grades because they had to be out there working on the farm. I got lucky. When I came along. Of course I battled a little harder myself, to go to school.

T: So all your brothers didn't finish high school.

A: Hey, you're a farmer's son. That's it.

T: You were at a CC Camp in Idaho when the Navy recruiters came by. The chief that came in made a pitch to everyone at the camp there to join the Navy?

A: He kind of qualified you a little. He asked a lot of questions or at least some. I think the Navy was really out to recruit because the national emergency was started. So they didn't have too many... usually if a guy got bumped from that it wasn't the recruiter that did it. It was after he reached the place where he was to go into training. Then they bumped you out for flat feet and stuff like that.

T: What did the Navy recruiter say that caught your attention?

A: Future. The future. They dressed it up pretty well. They were careful not to mention anything about any war (*chuckles*). I don't think I'd have been that eager.

T: What did you hear when he was talking? What kind of things were attracting your attention?

A: I thought it was a place to go to medical school and become a doctor. That's all. On that low step there in the CCC Camp. I thought, hey, that's the way to go. And they had a way of finding out what you were interested in. So they kind of enhanced that thought. That's what really got me going for the Navy. If I had known anything about any war coming up, believe me...

T: So you saw the Navy as the opportunity out of the situation you were in?

A: Yes. I thought the option that I could really use. Anything else was kind of out. You either had to go to work with someone, and I figured that would take along time to get through medical school, you go out there and start digging holes with a pick and shovel. You had to have a bit shorter route than that. The Navy was a good step. And it would have really worked. In fact my friends that were not POWs, that first went through training, through that hospital corps school, some of those guys were commanders and full-fledged doctors after the war.

T: So being a POW did impact you in that way as well. You left for the Navy pretty much right away, didn't you? From CCC Camp.

A: Out of high school. I left for the CC Camp.

T: You were recruited from the CC Camp. Did you go back to see your folks before you left for Basic Training?

A: Oh, yes. I went back on boot leave. The old boot leave was always three months after training. I went back then and I went back I believe one other time.

T: How did your folks take your decision to join the Navy?

A: They were neutral. They were kind of neutral. There was no room for me on the farm at home. I don't remember my dad ever discouraging it, or encouraging it for that matter.

T: Just sort of an acceptance.

(1, A, 244)

A: Yes. That's the way it is.

T: Was your mom any different? The way she responded?

A: Well, mothers are a little different, because mothers like to have you nearby. She wasn't as eager to see us leave for far away places.

T: Were you the first of your brothers to go into service?

A: Yes.

T: How many others went in during the war?

A: Well, in the family, one brother-in-law and three brothers and two brothers-in-law.

T: So three of your brothers were in the service. I know from talking to you earlier that one of your brothers was a POW of the Germans until 1945.

After boot camp were you assigned immediately to the *Houston*?

A: Oh, no. After boot camp you could choose the branch you were interested in and I chose hospital corps school. Some guys chose electrical schools and others gunnery and like that. Mine was medical. I went to hospital corps school for six months.

T: Where was that?

A: In Mare Island, California. By San Francisco. Out in the bay.

T: What did you think of San Francisco?

A: I thought San Francisco was the most beautiful city in the world. And I still think it is.

T: What did you find so attractive about it?

A: The way the city was laid out. And all the bays and waterways they have around them. It's just a pretty place.

T: What was it like for a young man, here you are maybe nineteen, twenty years old, on your own, in the Navy in San Francisco? How do you feel about yourself now?

A: That was an eye-popping experience to see all these places. And just the city itself. San Francisco has beautiful buildings and beautiful everything. Again, after North Dakota it was something. It was an experience.

T: Did you write regularly to your folks back home in North Dakota?

A: Oh, yes. We were pretty well brought up in that respect. Although I don't suppose you can really interest a guy into writing home. But we just were a pretty close family. As much as you can. Once we got aboard ship and the war started it got skimpy.

T: Communication you mean.

A: Yes. They had to get the letters home and so forth. I rarely got any.

T: After the training at Mare Island did you join the ship in California?

A: No. Again I had an option to go to another school. I wasn't real crazy about going to sea.

T: Is that right?

A: It didn't really intrigue me at all. I liked shore duty. I chose another school in Washington, D.C. That was dental school. I went to dental school for about four months.

T: So for you, what I hear you saying is, it was really all about educational opportunity.

A: Yes. I went to another school after dentist school. I went to the Naval School of Pharmacology. And that was, again, about that long. Three months maybe. I was headed to get the medical degree sometime.

T: Where was the pharmacology school?

A: It was in Washington, D.C. I spent close to eight months in Washington.

T: What did you think of Washington?

A: Washington, D.C., was a pretty city again. I liked it. I didn't like the weather real well, but after coming from the West Coast, San Diego and San Francisco, it was pretty confining stuff. High humidity. Terrible. But the city I liked. Pretty city, and a lot of interesting places. Being on the East Coast there's a lot of history places and stuff like that. A lot of good places to go to, like the theater in New York. You didn't have to go very far to find history.

T: After boot camp you spent time really going to school a number of different places to try to push your career along.

A: Yes.

T: You did a number of different medical courses here. Did you join the crew of the *Houston* ultimately by choice, or did you run out of school options?

A: That was mostly it. School options I was as far as I could go. Then I had to go to duty somewhere. Then I did volunteer for the *Houston* because I knew she was going to go to an Asiatic station.

T: Did you want to go to Asia?

A: Kind of. I wanted to go somewhere else before I got too old, and as long as I could still pursue what I was after, I thought why not. And it would have worked if it hadn't been for the war. The Japs beat me in there.

T: Where was the *Houston* stationed?

A: In Manila, in the Philippine Islands. She was a capital ship and she was the big gun for that era.

T: How large was the crew of the *Houston*?

A: Usually around 1000 to 1100, depending on what operations were going on. I think when we got sunk we were close to 1100 because we had a few passengers. You always had passengers in the Navy.

T: Going somewhere.

A: Yes. To another ship. We'd take them along.

T: You spent a couple of years stationed in the Philippines then. Sometimes on ship but a lot of times on shore, you said earlier.

A: Yes.

(1, A, 320)

T: What kind of impact did the Philippines and the people of the Philippines make on you?

A: I was impressed with them because the first so-called natives you see in the southwest Pacific are what they used to call the Third World, and they hadn't got into the present living.

T: So was that a shock when you went through some of those islands on the way to the Philippines to see people who were...

A: That was a total shock. They'd live in huts. When we got to the Philippines the Spanish and the Americans had been there long enough where the Philippines—they called it the Pearl of the Pacific. Very beautiful city. You didn't have to go very far out of it to be back to huts and stilts and people living very rustic. It was so different from what we were used to. It was quite an experience. I liked it. I liked the Navy.

T: What kind of interactions did you have with Filipinos?

A: Good. Good relations with the Filipinos. They loved Americans. They were emulating us at every turn, which you could see. They liked our music. They liked our clothes. They liked our everything. They were very pro-American. They were just loyal people and they wanted us to stay there. They disliked the Japs.

T: Even before the war started?

A: Even before the war. Because of the treatment the Japanese had already given to places like Manchuria, China. They had been slaughtering people. The Filipinos were smart enough and educated enough—they talked about their university in Manila. They were educated and they knew what was coming. More or less. Like we did. We knew that war was coming.

T: By the time you were there, you were there 1939, 1940, 1941, what kind of information did you get? What kind of rumors were there about what might be happening soon?

A: The usual rumors were: we have to have war. It's inevitable. The Japanese were expanding something fierce. They were doing it slowly but surely. Like the places I just mentioned. They went into Manchuria first. They called it an "incident." They didn't call it a war. They went into China and it was another "incident." That's kind of the way the Japanese militarists operated. They were never honest with themselves. They'd tell you to this day if they were still around that none of those was really a war. They were just "incidents."

T: Does this mean that when the war, when war came between the US and Japan in December of 1941, that you weren't surprised?

A: No. I wasn't surprised a bit. You always think it's in the future, so when it suddenly happened, then you get a shock. A surprise. You had thought about it in the past. We just knew that it would happen sometime.

T: I want to ask a little more about contacts with the Filipinos. Did you live on board ship or did you live ashore?

A: Oh, yes. We lived on the ship. Unless you went in the hospital. Get some duty in the Naval Hospital. They had a big Naval Hospital. Then you would live on the shore. I was mostly on the ship and out always on exercises. I liked, excuse me, I loved the Filipinos. They were just great.

T: Did you employ them at all? On board ship for things?

A: Oh, yes. They brought things on board, some foods and provisions all the time. We bought from their grocery people and stuff like that.

T: You had interactions in a number of capacities.

A: Yes. It's a modern city. Manila. Like I say, right behind the store there probably was a hut and the natives living out in the woods. I liked the Filipinos. They're great people.

T: On board your ship at that time, a crew of a little more than one thousand, were there people of other races or ethnic groups on board the ship? Specifically blacks.

A: Very few. The Navy was, most of it and the rest of the country, there was this terrible thing still oppressing another race. Terrible racism really. We had blacks aboard. They could not carry a rating. They were mess men.

T: They worked in kitchens and things.

A: Cooks, bakers—and predominantly for the officers. Not so much for the crews. They didn't work for the crews cooking, but for the officers. I have to say this about the US Navy, they're a snotty bunch.

T: How's that?

A: Right there. They're old-timers. They go to the Naval Academy and they're so... They were, I don't know they're like now, but they were so regimented and so steeped in the ladder to go places as a militarist. You were just never in their circles. I was an officer myself but never really accepted with them.

T: So there were officers and there were enlisted men and there was a big chasm.

A: I would say that even if they gave you a rank, they were still not really quite accepted in the little Annapolis circle. I understand it largely happened in the Army too. And probably the Air Force.

T: As an enlisted person, did you have much contact with black enlisted personnel?

A: Not very much. Not very much. Even the blacks we had aboard ship. They became friendly with the medics like us because we --

End of Tape 1, Side A. Side B begins at counter 385.

A: We exchanged things with each other. Medical supplies and bandages and stuff like that. I did plenty of teeth cleaning for free and they brought extra food, officer's food. We were socializing then. But you know, when the war started they had some very heroic blacks in the Navy. Generally every time when we heard about it we never had any aboard ship. We had all Orientals. Chinese.

T: On board your ship?

A: Yes.

T: In what capacity were they?

A: Mess men. They (***)

T: So you had more Filipinos or Orientals than you did blacks on board ship?

A: They recruited them after we got to Manila. We got some blacks aboard but they went back with the ship that (**).

T: When you were sunk in March of 1942, how many blacks were left on board the ship?

A: I don't know of any.

T: So they really moved them out.

A: Yes. I don't know of a single black person that went down with the *Houston*. But I do know of several Chinese. We hired them locally and I don't know why that was exactly.

T: That's interesting. Did you come into contact with Mexican-Americans? Native Americans?

A: Yes. We had Mexican people. They were a little discriminated against too. They could get a rank. It was rare when you saw a Mexican guy, at least a second generation Mexican from California.

T: I'm hearing you say this was more unofficial segregation? I mean, the blacks were clearly segregated out. The Mexicans weren't, but to be promoted would have been difficult?

A: Much more so than Americans—white guys. The Navy was an exclusive club. They were in stages. The officers were the most exclusive and then the enlisted men, they got that way too on their own level.

(1, B, 428)

T: Among the majority white population was there a distinction between northerners and southerners, for example?

A: Yes. The southerners were kind of looked down on if they were from Deep South. I don't know whether it was so or not, but we kind of looked at them as being pretty uneducated people. Guys from Georgia, Alabama, and the Deep South. They talked differently, of course, and they acted quite a bit differently. Some of them, they just got out of the hills or something.

T: They weren't making it if they came from small places in the rural south. That's right. Let me move to another topic. When war came, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, which I think was December 8 in the Philippines. Do you remember what you were doing when you first heard the news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and other places in Asia?

A: Yes. I was sleeping. Still in bed. It was about four o'clock in the morning, the morning of the eighth. The ship's General Quarters alarm went off.

T: Were you in Manila harbor?

A: No. We were in Hilo Imo on the island of Cani, an island just south of Luzon. We were in their capitol port taking on fuel. We heard the general alarm go off and everybody was blasting over the loudspeaker that the war was on. They're bombing Pearl Harbor. We took off. We got out of there and we hadn't gotten out of the harbor and they were bombing us.

T: Really?

A: They knew exactly where we were. They were bombing us, and it didn't do much good. The bombs didn't even get really close to us which we thought, well this is great. (***). We found out differently afterwards.

T: How did you, yourself, react to your world—suddenly it was a different one? Instead of trying to go to school or advance as a medical technician, suddenly you were at war.

A: We had this feeling. It's crazy how kids think, but we were real proud of the Navy and our gunnery was the best. There's all these competitions, these local... On that picture over there's a big E on the stack and that's efficiency. The *Houston* had one. We were real proud of that and we knew our gunners were the very best. We'll take this war and we'll take these Japs on. They all have big Coke bottle lenses, and buckteeth, and they can't read, and they can't shoot. We were looking at three months, and then we go back to school.

T: Now was this something that guys openly talked about? This sort of sense of confidence that they can't possibly win?

A: Yes. They talked about it. We thought we'd do it a lot sooner than we ever ended up doing it. We weren't told what the Japanese really had. They had really a bigger fleet than we did by quite a bit. What counted, they really were bigger in the aircraft carriers. They were bigger than the British and the Americans combined. They were supposed to live according to the Treaty of 1927 following the disarmament, but they cheated and we weren't smart enough. They were prepared. They were fighting a war. They were fighting it big. We didn't care much about China. The incident in China and Manchuria. Not bad. They didn't tell us much.

T: So you were aware the Japanese were out there, but were shocked by really how much they had when you found out.

A: Oh, yes. They had the best airplane in the Pacific when the war started—they had the Zero. We couldn't even get close, our fighter planes. They shot them down like they were toys. We had poorly equipped people to start a war with. I hope it never happens to us again. We even had torpedoes that wouldn't go off and some of them would even make a U-turn and come back and hit the ship. That's how badly we had gotten.

T: But there was still a sense of confidence that you'd whip the Japanese.

(1, B, 506)

A: We were Americans. Football and baseball and everybody's competitive in this country. We didn't know that we had this poor equipment until the action started. We'd go out on maneuvers and perform but you never have live ammunition.

T: What about the Japanese? What had you learned up until now about the Japanese?

A: Not much. Except that they didn't look very good. We had some physical pictures of them that weren't good. And they of us. Because we found out later how they regarded us. They were just as bad as we were.

T: As far as racial stereotyping.

A: Yes. They all thought we had noses like Pinocchio and chins sticking out like Uncle Sam does and crooked features. Like we did with the Japs. It was a real racist war. Really. On both sides.

T: The first time that your ship came under serious attack by Japanese aircraft or Japanese ships, do you recall that?

A: Aircraft. We were picking up a group of soldiers which we later we prisoners of war with to take them to the island of Timor where the action had just passed. Portuguese Timor. The Japanese were going in there to take the place. This was before they got there. We were trying to head their fleet off. We were looking for their fleet off the island of Timor. We got bombed by several Japanese Mitsubishi's. Their four engine bombers. They worked us over pretty good.

T: Did your ship take some hits during that?

A: We got one hit. The after turret was blown out. The after turret on the ship, we had three turrets of nine inch guns. Each turret had three. Three, six, nine. And the back one was blown away. That's the one that hit and killed about forty people. That was my first experience at war and that's quite an awakening. When they bring those people down to sickbay or when you write on the sticks—I was sick in bed when that happened. I had Dengue fever. And when that actually started, they

brought them down there with holes in them and bleeding and I had to go to work. Never looked back. I just got well.

T: You say it was an awakening. Can you talk more about in what way that affected you?

A: You think you are playing football for instance. That it's just a big competition thing. Then when the bleeding starts and arms and legs flying around you realize... You've been shocked into this thing. And how bad it is. And hey, this isn't football. It goes on and on and on. Every day. You get kind of tired of it. Then you begin to find out that what you've got is not enough to fight these guys, because they always had us outnumbered. Always. You just have to run. Get out of there. It got kind of demoralizing fast. The games were over. It got bad. It's not a pretty picture. I think we had to find a way to figure out how young men could square that away without getting killed. Contests.

T: So it changed from an abstract war, a game in a sense, to something real very quickly.

A: Yes. Very untasteful. It's not good, war. I never saw a single guy that really ever thought, "This is great," after the bombs started dropping. Not one. We did our duty and we were... but nobody was eager anymore to say: let's go out and whip them. They'd much rather go back to the States any time.

T: Quickly becoming demoralized because you were outnumbered. There was obviously no chance of any reinforcements coming your way.

A: No. They had us blocked off. They had enough fleet to do that. I don't know. This war would still be going on if it hadn't been for Australia, I think, because they had taken almost everything except Australia. They were close to taking that.

T: Yes.

What are the circumstances surrounding the sinking of the *Houston* on March 1, 1942?

A: Like I said, as soon as we woke up they were ringing bells and it was, "Let's go get them." We didn't see any action right away. They were bombing us but, like I say, they were dropping bombs in the harbor. Fifty, sixty yards away. They didn't hit us, so we were still pretty much gung ho. Then when we got into this place going to Timor and they hit us. We got hit and killed all those people. We got serious about it.

T: How about when the ship was sunk on 1 March? What were the circumstances surrounding that?

A: That was a big mess. A naval action. A surface action. Not really open to anybody but the people that are running it. The guys up in the conning tower and the gunnery people. Gunnery officers usually and the captain of course. The average guy doesn't know what's going on. I didn't.

T: But you did see that they hit you.

A: No, I didn't. They told me to go up on the top deck because they said they had a hit up there. Nobody was hit yet, but I went up there and I could see a lot of shells flying over us and on us. I thought, this is bad. They were all red-hot. Not unpretty. Kind of like the Fourth of July at night. I could see the shells, and the heat that comes with it. Until they started hitting. I didn't really get scared until after. You're trained to do what you do. You see those things and you don't even think. Then when it gets down to the bodies flying all around you and you gotta get out of the way, then you start thinking a little bit. But when I got out and got ashore, when the Japs started tying me up, that's when I got scared. I could have got it in that. A lot of guys did.

T: How many of the crew of 1000 or 1100, how many actually survived the sinking?

A: I'm thinking it's probably half. I never got any figures on that, and I doubt if anybody has got an exact figure. I'd say around seven hundred.

T: Do you recall the ship actually sinking? And what did you have to do as the ship sunk?

A: I was called shortly before that. The captain got hit up on the conning tower. That was quite a few decks up. The conning tower is not the last thing up there, but it's close. I was supposed to go there. Well, the captain... I never got there. I found out that the captain was probably already dead when I got the message. Because I was a corpsman, I had this bag around my neck full of medical stuff. Mostly morphine. In action that's the first thing we do. A shot of morphine. I started to go up there, but there was fire in front of me. When I got up toward amidships I had to go back to the stern. I just couldn't go through that. Then you're waiting for what the next announcement is. Then they gave the abandon ship one. We were really getting hit.

T: Was the ship listing?

A: Listing. She was listing to the port side and forward. It was getting to where, "Hey, this is bad." I don't know the degrees or anything like that. These shells were coming in closer and then exploding and some of the guys, always in those situations, panic. They'd fly off that ship when they'd see their buddies blown all to hell at the gun station.

T: So guys were leaving the ship before the abandon ship order came?

A: Yes. Some—where the action was. The abandon ship order came in. Very methodically we did what—we had to take our shoes off. Big mistake. We set them up against the railing like they were. “Take your shoes off and do not take them along.” Oh, my. Could I have used shoes after that.

We heard the alarm go off. I was standing there with another guy. He said, I’m going to go down to my locker and get my money. He was a real operator. He was an entrepreneur. He always had lots of money. Several hundred dollars. He said, I’m going to go back. Well, he took off from sickbay. I never saw him again. Kid from Boston. His name was Sigmund Yustzinski. I’ll never forget. A good friend of mine. Nice guy.

I was standing with another guy and he said, “I’m going to jump.” And I said, “I’ll go with you.” His name was Dave Williams. So I hitched up my medical kit. I thought, “I’m going to take this thing along. For sure I gotta have that.” We jumped off the stern. The ship was really listing then. The screws were sticking up, so she was out of the water. I don’t know how deep that was, but the stern—the stern on a heavy cruiser, most any ship, is not very far above the water. About ten feet at the outside. I don’t know. This looked like I was floating through the air there when I jumped. Thirty feet. I don’t know. It just seemed farther. But then I figured it out. The screws were already up in the air, so it had to be a long distance. I just missed one of those screws, and they were still going. They’re huge. Huge brass. Then I hit the water. I was a pretty good swimmer and I couldn’t come up out of the water. I kicked my feet to beat heck to get to the surface. I must have sunk quite a ways. I just got so short of breath that I almost suffocated. Then I grabbed the strap of this medical kit and I pulled it over my head and I popped up like a cork. That thing was full of water and medical supplies.

T: Did you lose the bag there or not?

A: I lost it. And that was another mistake. Oh, my, could we have used some of that stuff after. Well, they wouldn’t have let us have it—they took everything we had. Anyway, I came up and there I was. I saw the ship sinking and I saw the screws up in the air and I saw the flag. I’ll never forget that flag. Waving in the breeze on the stern. She went down.

T: What were your thoughts right then and there in the water? Was there fire in the water at all or not?

A: There was a thick oil slick on the water. Maybe an inch, inch and a half thick. And there were some fires. But not near me. I didn’t see any. Some of the guys did, and they were burned. I didn’t hit any fire. But that thick oil. When then pulled me out of the water—it was nine hours later; I was in the water nine hours—they pulled me out, and everybody looked like your instrument here: black.

T: And it sticks to you, doesn’t it?

A: Yes. We didn't know if a guy was black or white or what. A Jap launch came along and they had a machine gun pointing at us, another guy and I. Well, first of all, we starting heading for one of the rafts that were left. You throw it overboard before the ship goes down. And the Japs were strafing them.

T: The rafts?

A: Yes. They were full of wounded usually. The guys were just picking up wounded and putting them on there. I did that for a little bit. Then you had a chance to get on yourself because we were able to swim. Well, then they started strafing us and I said to Dave, "I'm not going to stick around here. Let's get out of here. We're just going to get killed." He and I got out and we were hanging onto things forever it seemed. It was night. This [Japanese] launch came around the bend and picked us up. Had machine guns on us and rifles. Motioning to us and hollering at us about getting up in there. Well, I couldn't even raise my arms let alone get up in that stupid launch.

T: Were any of the Japanese in this launch speaking English?

A: Not a bit. Not those. The very first ones. That came later. In fact, real quickly after that. Finally they reached down and picked myself and this other fellow up and threw us in there.

T: What thoughts were in your head at that moment when you were, you could see these Japanese guys in the boat and you're sitting there?

(1, B, 685)

A: Dave and I talked about it. He said, "What are we going to do?" He was a younger guy than I was. I'd been around a little longer in the Navy than he was, so he wanted to know what we should do and I said, "Start praying." He said, "You know how?" And I said, "Sure I know how. I already prayed." He said, "How do you pray?" I said, "You don't have a special prayer. Just say something. You know, like get us out of here, Lord." That went on for a few minutes. Then here they were. And you think, well, we heard all these atrocity stories. The rape of Nanking and oh, my.

T: You had an image in your mind already of what the Japanese were like.

A: Just the leveling of the machine guns on us. Do us in. It didn't happen. They must have had ideas. They really wanted us to unload their ships. The very ships we had been sinking. We sunk a few of their supply ships. They never did it to me, but they did to lots of the other guys. The very first thing, they pulled them out of the water they put them on a ship to unload supplies. They didn't give them anything to eat or drink. If you didn't bleed, they made [you] do it. But they didn't do that to us, to my group. [When we got to shore] they threw me over there on a sand pile. Dave and I, there on shore. Then they got us in. They tied us together. Back to back.

T: Were you injured at all at this time?

A: I had some shrapnel wounds on my legs. They were small. They got bigger as time went on, but then I didn't hurt anything. I didn't even look down. It was dark; until the sun came up you couldn't see [anything], because we were so full of oil. We were there and they tied us back to back. Dave and I. Then they had us stand on the sand on shore. Oh, that was a mess by about ten o'clock when the sun came up. It must have been ninety degrees right away in the morning or close to it. I got blisters. People started hollering and moaning. They wouldn't give us any water. Food, not until the next day. They gave us a little water at night. Hot water. Then we were tied up. I don't know how much longer than that. After all [that], they let us loose and got some guards out there to stand around us with bayonets.

T: Clean the oil off at all or not?

A: No. It was on there, and you'd scrape it off with your hand and throw it on the ground. It sticks. It was terrible. And they wouldn't give us any medicine for the guys that were getting blisters from burns from the fires and from the oil. So that didn't help. That was a terrible, terrible experience, because guys were still dying from their wounds. They wouldn't let you go stop a guy's bleeding leg, for God's sake. They'd just kick you right in the face. They were just mean. So we left that alone pretty well. We knew they were rough. I was fully prepared to take a bullet. I really was. I thought, Oh, man, what all are they going to do? After a few hours it got a little better. I guess what they were working on was getting some people to work for them.

T: How many guys were together with you here?

A: Little groups. When you go off a sinking ship you go every direction. Our group would go this way and that group would go that way. There was probably a dozen or so in my little group, and then a few yards down the beach there was another dozen.

T: So you could see other guys from the ship. Maybe not right with you, but other places around.

A: You could see black guys out there. But some of the guys got out and made it to different places. Some never got captured right away. They just made it into the jungle, and then the natives turned them in anyway. They were hostile. They didn't like white people, because the Dutch had ruled them for about three hundred years. They were tough. They were second class or third class people. And yet the Dutch would mingle with them. Inter marry and everything else. Funny situation, but they were always a few rungs higher.

(1, B, 733)

T: At this point had you begun to be scared, standing on the beach?

A: I was getting good and scared. Then I just knew they were going to shoot us. What else? They're not giving us any food. They're not giving us any water. They're letting guys bleed to death. They're just going to kill us all, slowly but surely. Shoot us. Yes, I was scared. You bet I was scared. I had time then to get scared.

T: How long did you stay there before you were moved somewhere else?

A: Practically all day long, on that beach. And towards the evening they said they had some quarters for us that they were going to put us in, and they did have. It was an old British jail. We were there all day and then they started us marching over there. It was thirty kilometers away [close to twenty miles].

We started to walk, but the guys couldn't do it. I know how exhausted I was. I was one of the guys that still could help a little. I was in good physical shape. I weighed 195 pounds. I just never loafed around. I kept myself in good shape. A lot of exercise. We were losing guys. Guys were dropping down, and we had heard about the Bataan Death March [This is not possible; Bataan March was April 1942].

T: So this was something that you knew about already.

A: Yes. They slaughtered them over there. Our leaders told us about that real quick. I was glad they did. Just to say it scared us. They killed a few people then too, on the beach. A few of our guys. So and so got shot the first day. They didn't do that with me, obviously, or any of the people that were around me. Took us on this march to go to this British jail. It was about three hundred years old. It was a British jail, and the reason I say it was three hundred years old, because the Dutch had owned the island for three hundred years, but everything was British. The old chains, huge long chains. Cobblestone in the bottom. And put them on your legs.

T: They put chains on you?

A: No. Not in there. There wasn't nearly enough. But where they had their prisoners they just kicked them out. Turned them loose and put us in there. They had cubicles. They were about, maybe as big as the kitchen, and they filled them all. Standing up. We couldn't lay down to sleep. We couldn't sit down because it was too crowded. So we had to do it in shifts, and of course the wounded ones had to sit and lay first. When your shift came around you'd get to lay down. Then the wounded ones couldn't get up anyways. I stood for an awful long time. I don't know. You just do it. You just hope and pray that you gotta get out of there or something. They still hadn't given us any water except that one little cup of hot water. They came around with another one since I got in that jail. No toilet facilities at all. They were just in there. They locked the chain around there. They had a Dutch clock sitting out in the middle of the compound. There were cells all around this jail. In the center was a huge --

End of Tape 1. Tape 2, Side A begins at counter 000.

A: There was a Dutch clock, and we all figured that one out. That was contrived. That was on purpose. That was a method of punishing. They tried to take everything away from you. They set a thirty day period and it turned out to be thirty days. This clock would go off and then they brought a cup of water. We had that water and then, after a few hours they brought a bowl of rice. Just packed. About the size of not a softball, but a little larger than a baseball. Dirty. Just leavings that they cooked up. Nothing else in it. No salt. Just a bowl of rice. And they gave that to us. Boy, it tasted pretty good. We each had one of those. My stomach was so empty by then. I don't know how many hours it had been since we had eaten or anything. They gave us that. Then we got that every day for twenty nine days.

T: So you were there for thirty days.

A: The punishment area. Yes.

T: Did people die in this cell while you were there?

A: All the time. Enough guys down in our cell that we could almost sleep. We had one corner for toilet facilities, but if you're not eating or drinking it gets to be a thing that's probably not even necessary. They were going the first few days. Eliminate in the corner on the floor. After a while, after the second or third day, they finally brought a bucket in, but it got a little messy around there. Of course no food. Then this left a terribly big problem. It was big enough. But if you don't have food, you don't eliminate. If you don't drink water, you know.

T: What are people talking about as this is going on day to day?

A: Everything. Everything. We used to lay there. Here we were, three thousand miles from home and laying on a dingy, dirty, close area on a hard rock floor, a cobblestone floor. Half the guys are wounded. I was wounded. I had some shrapnel wounds, but like I said earlier they weren't serious. I laid down with the guy next to me on the floor and we're talking and talking and he said, "Where are you from?" And I said, "I'm from North Dakota." "The hell you are!" I said, "Where are you from?" "I'm from North Dakota." I said, "What town?" And he said, "You never heard of it." And I said, "Try me." "Southridge." I said, "Hell, I used to play basketball against you." Southridge is only about ten or fifteen miles from Raleigh. That's where I was born. He had graduated the same year I did. His name was Bigger. I remembered the name then. I knew him just barely on ship. He was in the fire division and I was down below. A fireman. He came into the office when I was chief, but I wasn't a real close friend of his. Believe me, we got to be close.

You think about, well, you can't think about your future there. You just have to think, I'm going to make it out of here today. If I make it to sunrise then we'll see what happens.

T: So I hear you saying, you literally took it one day at a time.

(2, A, 72)

A: You have to. You go crazy if you start thinking about what could be or what... This went on the whole time we were confined there. And it went on the whole time we were prisoners of war. You live on rumors. Guys make up rumors. And you live on talking about food.

T: Did that start almost immediately?

A: Almost immediately. Twenty-four hours a day. When your stomach gets empty, you hurt. You hurt a while when your stomach's empty, but you know after about three, four, five days of just the minimum amount of food, a dirty rice bowl, you're not quite as hungry as you were the first day. You kind of adapt, I suppose. By God, you can stay alive on very little food. Not weeks and months, but days. Then they have to give you something for nourishment.

Our big nourishment all the time I was a prisoner was six to eight hundred calories a day. After we started working, physical work, a guy six foot tall and two hundred pounds, the very minimum our nutritionists used to tell us, and we had them in camp, our nutrition people, they said you had to have up to one thousand a day. I don't know what the Americans eat now, but it probably wasn't three thousand. But we lived on six, seven.

T: Early in that first jail, or later, you had a way of dealing with things. Kind of a one day at a time approach. Were there other people who were not as successful in dealing with this new situation?

A: Some people went out of their heads. They couldn't... I always like to attribute it to being from on the farm.

T: What difference does that make, do you think?

A: You're more resourceful. You think a little different too. In this place it didn't really matter a lot, because you had no access to any food whatsoever. But afterwards it got to be a little different. New Yorkers from the East Side and some of those guys that scrounged, they were the best POWs.

T: Who had the toughest time as a POW?

A: The rich kids, spoiled kids. All these things we have now. And one of the big factors was a belief in God. You just had to believe.

T: Did you become a more religious person during your time as a POW, or were you a religious person when the ship was sunk?

A: We were Catholic, and we were as religious as Catholics got in those days. My folks were German on top of it. They believed in the old school. Strict disciplinarian and stuff. Sort of regimented. I guess that's probably a poor word for it, but it's close. You get plenty of religion in there.

T: Did you go to church every Sunday as a kid?

A: Oh, yes. Or you went to hell (*laughs*). I don't believe that anymore.

T: How and what ways do you think that faith or religion helped you, Al?

A: I think you could keep your mind together believing that hey, if I do die there is something else. But a guy laying there, and I could almost figure that out, with some of those guys. If they're laying there thinking, that's all she wrote, then that is all she wrote. They're going to die. And if your mind goes, your body is right behind it. If your mind is off, you're a dead duck. We had guys that would simply lay down and not eat anymore and die three days later. Can you imagine a guy dying in three days time because he sort of willed it on himself?

We had a medical doctor, an MD, well-educated, a young guy. He was older than the rest of us, but he wasn't an old man. He was probably twenty-eight when we were twenty-one. He told me, he said, and he was as smart as any guy I ever knew, he said, "This war's going to last ten years. And I'm not going to be around in ten years in this place." The next day or so or afternoon, he told another guy that he wasn't going to be around until Thursday. We had a big idea about Thursday. We had to really think what it was, because we weren't allowed any calendars. On Thursday or Friday he was dead. That was real demoralizing. The guys all loved him. He had no medicines to treat them. What a terrible thing that was. When he just wouldn't eat any more, he just lay there and died.

T: He really willed it. He just gave up.

(2, A, 159)

A: Yes. He just gave up. It wasn't very hard.

Several guys did that. I saw it. Some guys, you have to slap them into eating a spoonful of rice. One guy I gave it to one day, I sat there and I gave him a spoonful of rice, and he just kept it in his cheek and I gave him another one. He kept it in his cheek. He wouldn't swallow. I said, "Swallow that stuff." I kept putting it in there. Finally I got quite a bit of gruelly rice in him and he blew it up into my face. I slapped him back and forth. Slapped him real hard. And boy did he get a spark. He looked up at me and said, "You son of a bitch. If I get out of here I'm going to kill you." And he lived. And when did he die? Two years ago. All this time he lived. He was a tough son of a bitch.

T: But even he was demoralized at that point, right?

A: Yes. He was ready to die. And he would have died. I know he would have died.

T: Did you yourself ever get demoralized?

A: Yes. Lots of times.

T: Are there things that brought that on for you?

A: Yes. There were some things. Little things that all worked together. When we moved into Burma. When we went by Hell Ship to Burma.

T: Before we started taping, we made a list of the different stops that you had as a POW before you were liberated in September of 1945. You were saying that first camp experience, that thirty days at Serang on Java, was one of the worst, and the time when you were working on the railroad in Burma was also awfully bad.

A: Yes. And the only reason that we survived that first thirty days was we were still in pretty good shape. We had most of our two hundred pounds yet. You lose some, but you kind of have something to keep you going. By the time we got into the jungle on the railroad we'd already lost quite a bit of weight. We weren't in the best of health to begin with, and it was probably a little harder from that perspective.

T: What role did disease or illness play in thinning the ranks of the people who survived the ship sinking?

A: Huge. Illness, well I think all of us except for probably the direct illnesses like malaria, you get from the mosquito. But the rest, most of the rest, you get from malnutrition. If the situation is perfect, your body could fight most anything, because you have all these antibodies and stuff to battle any disease. But if you don't get the nourishment, the supplies to get that blood circulating and healing, then you're in bad shape. You can't fight anything. You couldn't fight a bad cold. The body is pretty tough, but it's got to have nourishment to make it. Most people died from disease. Lack of medicine.

T: What diseases were most common that you saw?

(2, A, 205)

A: Most common ones were malaria. And there again, there is a specific for malaria: quinine. Been known for years. And we were right in the quinine belt when we were in Malaya. They were raising it there. We got absolutely a minimum. They'd give us a ridiculous amount. Fifty quinine tablets, for instance, for two hundred people laying there with malaria. So where do you go? You get the worst ones that want to die first, and you give it to them.

Other diseases too. That Dengue fever was bad. Then when we got on the Death Railway, I think the worst one became probably equal with malaria, was ulcers. Skin ulcers that become flesh ulcers. They go right down to the bone, and you either amputate or the guy dies. They get gangrene. The way you get them is your body gets in such poor shape that you got out on this railroad, and nobody had any clothes. They were wearing for the most part a G-string.

T: And no shoes obviously.

A: No shoes. Some guys had shoes for a while, but by the time that railroad was three days old they were gone. So they wore clogs. What we call clogs. It was a strap over a piece of wood. Some guys kept their shoes longer, or some guys died and they got their shoes. They made do that way. I don't think there were, maybe there were one or two prisoners that had shoes when the war ended. I didn't see any. Anyway, they'd get these chips from the rock.

You see, there was no machinery to build this railway. The British had tried it with modern machinery in 1927. As modern as you could get. They had Caterpillars and dozers and stuff like that. The Japanese had nothing. They made shovels. Made them! And the only manufactured thing they had out there on the railroad to work with was dynamite. They had explosives. They used that. Then they got hammers. They supplied hammers where they'd beat the rocks.

And here you are with the bare legs, and you'd hit those rocks and they'd fly all over and hit you in the leg. And the least little scratch on your leg from a piece of rock would start an ulcer. And once it got started it was just terrible. No medicines to cure it. And what we had to do, it was quite often, we just scrape the ulcer. Scrape off the flesh and let the new start. And we made bandages, if you can believe it, out of the rags that were really rags from somebody's shirt. That had to be a real rag. We boiled them out. Just boiled them and put them back on. Without medicine. We'd scrape out the ulcers and take off the bad flesh. We even planted maggots in some of the bandages, then bandage them up. These maggots, they go in there and those ulcers would come out looking red and with nice new flesh.

T: Because the maggots would eat the decayed flesh?

(2, A, 243)

A: Yes. We would have to take the maggots off or they would keep on eating. This was a painful process to the guys. You had no anesthetic. Those maggots hurt when they're eating flesh. These same guys, if they didn't have too big an ulcer, they made them go out on the railroad. We had what we called sick call in the mornings. Still dark. They'd get them out of the huts, and the Japs would come in. Full bayonets. Rifles. And we already had the sick call with the guys to say, "You can go out on the railroad today." Maybe say, "How do you feel?" Guys were all sick—even the orderlies were sick. But the guys that were half dead, they still made them walk there.

I know two or three times, oh more than that, I saw them take patients out and they'd just have to lay there, they're sicker than a dog, and pound some rock. That was our sick call. We had the same doctor that died. He did a couple of amputations that I helped him with, but the patients died. If you couldn't stop the ulcer, the patient is going to die. Because if you amputated there wasn't enough nourishment in the guy to live. Simple amputation like a leg. I personally did some too. I did some toes. I took three toes off a guy that were full of ulcers. He's alive. He's still living.

T: You were a medical professional. You'd been through years of schooling. How do you adjust to really having nothing to work with?

A: You improvise tools. Guys brought in jackknives. Once in a while they'd find another one. It couldn't be very big because the Japs would take it away from you. For instance, I did a lot of teeth extractions, with a pair of pliers. Guys would hold them down. I did a full mouth on a guy one day. All his teeth. Every one. All infected. He had a mouth like a pit. He lived. Joe Gantz, from New Jersey. He was so infected. When I worked aboard ship and did this, we didn't dare extract a tooth that was infected because it sets up a septicemia, or bigger infection. We couldn't pay any attention to that in the jungle because the guy was screaming. So I pulled all his teeth with a pair of pliers.

T: Just one at a time you pulled them out?

A: One at a time. He fainted along the way there somewhere, because the guy didn't have to hold him down anymore. Then it was kind of easy. I pulled the rest of them. You break half of them. There's no instrument to go in there after the broken root. He told me after the war, I met him at a meeting in Dallas, and he said he went to his doctor when he got back. His dentist took x-rays of him. He said he came out of the x-ray and said, "My God, who worked on you last?" (*laughs*). And then the guy of course told him. That's the kind of... all those things. Like even when the doctors did an amputation, they did it with a bread knife. Something they could cut with. You had no forceps there to stop the bleeders. Even hardly enough to stop the bleeding. The guy lost so much blood, and of course you couldn't give him a blood transfusion because you had no facilities to do that. It was just a different experience. That's putting it very mildly.

(2, A, 290)

T: Another theme: your opinion of the Japanese. You had to interact with these people.

A: All the time.

T: What were the interactions like between the prisoners and the Japanese?

A: Mostly terrible. They hated us, and we hated them. And they had the guns. And they paid no attention to the Geneva Convention, which was supposed to outlaw such things. And they beat on us pretty good. I got beat up only two times in all the time I was in there, but I got it good. Little infractions that are meaningless. I didn't salute. You had to salute them every time you saw them. You saw the guy how many times a day? You better be saluting. Any Japanese, you had to salute. Just the littlest corporal or the littlest private, you better salute. If you were a colonel it didn't make any difference—you still saluted.

The two beatings I got, one was I forgot to salute. I didn't see that little bugger. Pardon the expression. I just didn't see him. I knew a lot of things, and I taught guys this. What happened was, I borrowed a toothbrush from a soldier. He had two, and he gave me one. And it was used, but I used it. We'd go out and burn charcoal from pieces of wood underneath the rice pots. Then put it in your hand and put it on this toothbrush and scrub your teeth, which is very abrasive. Not good for your teeth, but it saved mine. I was brushing away by a little mango tree, no mangoes on it, but it was a mango tree. There was a Jap standing there. I was spitting on the ground. That's the only place to spit. Had this little cup of water which I was using to rinse, and I saw his toes. They had split toed boots in the army. I saw those split toed boots and I knew I was in for it. Right then, I just knew I was going to get beat up. First beating I got. I kept going. My vision kept going up to his knees and then up to his thighs, and a full-fledged Jap. There he stood. And he was already glaring. Looking for an excuse to beat on me. Boy, he had an excuse. I said, "I didn't see you." I saluted then, but it was too late.

We go this way when somebody wants you with your finger (*index finger curling towards self*). They go full hand down, like this (*hand out, fingers down, outstretched then back motion*). Come to me. Now he's giving me this. I went over there and he came around and he swung at me with the rifle butt. And they were all littler than we are, so I just leaned back pretty decently and he just grazed me with the rifle butt. Just missed my chin. And he fell across himself, over his own body, and he had this bayonet sticking up and he almost impaled himself. That heated him up. He got mad, because he almost hurt himself real bad. Then he came swinging. He brought that butt again and hit me in the stomach with the butt and I folded up. Knocked the wind out of me. What he did then I really don't know, because I was half unconscious. He just kicked me. The guys [the other POWs] were standing there and the guys get kind of weird habits. In order to make you stand this, they'd do things like cheer. They'd cheer you. You can take it. Have him kick you in the testicles and stuff like that.

T: The Japanese or the Americans?

A: The Americans. Just to buck up your spirit. Oh, Kopp, you can take it. Have him kick you in the cons (*laughs*). So you do weird things in those places. Ruder than that. But anyway he kept working me over and I got... I was awful, awful sore for several days where he kicked me in the butt. Even with that rubber split toed boot. It was good. If he had had those hard boots like we wear, hard toes, I think he would have broke all the ribs I had.

T: It's clear they were in the power position. Were there, nevertheless, ways to get back at the Japanese? Or to get at them?

A: Very few, because the death offense was there, and they chopped that head for any reason. They were very bad about that. I was with an Englishman, old Mac, this was in Saigon when we had a real tough guard. He would break arms and everything. Just come around beating guys, and the guy would go like this and break their arm.

T: This was in Saigon.

A: In Saigon already. That's where the good camp was supposed to be. This Englishman was here sitting at this table and we were talking about it. By the way, that's where he and I both got a beating. That's another subject, but we were trading for our food with the natives. They had got native Dutch Indonesians; they're of small stature and they got all their army supplies when they capitulated, and that's why they issued them to us for free. Even as skinny as we were, and we were skinny, the bone structure wouldn't hold those Dutch native pants. They were so little. So we traded them off for bananas or whatever the natives had. The natives could use them because they were just the right size.

So we got caught doing that. Then we disappeared into the crowd and the Jap couldn't find us and they got madder and madder. So they called everybody out. There must have been two hundred people there. Then he said, "If the two people would come forward that were selling the Emperor's clothes, (that's what the term was), we won't punish you but you have to admit it." We knew that old trick. Mac and I sat nearby. We had heard that a hundred times for what we did. So then he started beating on a guy that was sick. He was a chaplain. Nicest guy, and he was so sick. He couldn't hardly stand. He walked over there and just to make us... He didn't have to hit him but once and we both stepped out to admit it, and then we got the works.

But when he got done... They were weird people. The Oriental mind, you never know what they're thinking. At least that Caucasian guy doesn't know. Maybe they don't understand us either. But as soon as we got through—he wasn't even done. The Jap captain of the camp, he came in, and I was treating him for gonorrhea. They'd go out and get a venereal disease, and I'd make him go get some medical supplies, and I'd treat him. We were almost trembling. It was such a big offense, a death offense if they got themselves a venereal disease. It was a real big offense.

T: So you were treating him...

A: So I had kind of a knuckle on him, just to question him. That's the only one I ever had on him. He made him quit. And he said, "Why were you trading? You trade clothes away?" I said, "Yes. Look—they're that big, and my bones are that big." "Ah, so." He tells the guard to come over and take me in the kitchen, feed me some rice. They took us in that kitchen and the guards were mad because he made them stop.

He did. I had to treat him the next day. He got us in there, and MacKenzie and I sat in there and we ate rice balls. We never ate so many rice balls in our life. And the guards just kept standing there. Eat some more! We chowed them down until we were almost sick. That was my second beating and only one.

T: Would you say that you received fewer beatings than other guys on average?

A: I would say yes. Quite a bit less. Because they had sort of a pervasive respect for somebody with a little more authority among the sick. Then, like I say, we treated some Japs. They'd get you some medicine. I had this guy give me quinine. He never brought me a lot, but the Pasteur Institute was within walking distance of the camp.

T: This is in Saigon?

A: Yes. Saigon. Huge medical place. Hospital and the whole laboratory. I know they had medicines because the Japanese guards were all over the place and they had them. But he'd go and get me stuff. I'd say, you bring me so and so and I'll treat your gonorrhea. They had crude treatments for all venereal disease and we did start with the--

End of Tape 2, Side A. Side B begins at counter 383.

T: Did these Japanese speak English at all?

A: Yes. Quite a few. Some of the lower ranks they didn't—they spoke very pigeon English. Most of their officers [spoke English] and some were as fluent as we were. It wasn't unusual to hear one of the guards say...

I know one day one of my friends told they me they were unloading a ship, and they were stealing, of course. POWs are the best thieves in the world. I used to wonder what would happen if we all got back, because everybody stole. You had to steal. Everybody learned to steal. You have to, to live. I didn't have access to so many places, but the guys would steal for me and bring me extra food. If they hadn't, I wouldn't be here. Four hundred calories is not going to keep you alive too long. You're going to have to steal and do things. So they'd get on this working party and they'd steal.

T: You mentioned when you were in Burma you had what you might call a let down, or a drop in your own morale.

A: I thought I was pretty good at preaching to the guys about bucking them up. Really it was the most I had to offer. It was psychological, I suppose. The thing is, if you can get their spirits up one way or another it didn't matter, if you can get them up a little bit and not let yourself down.

When we got to Moline we had just been bombed, and the Dutch got hit the worst on that. They put twenty-two guys in an American church in Moline. They had me tend them all by myself. I didn't even have a guard at first. Nobody there

but me and those twenty-two guys. They said, you stay with them and make them well. They all died. All twenty-two died. Because they were just all (**). This guy's jaws were like that. That's what I remember. One guy. I had no equipment and nothing to cut it off and to get it back.

T: What was wrong with his jaw?

A: He was bombed. And some guys were laying there with no limbs. I was trying to patch them up with the bandages they got me. And it was smelly in there, and guys were dying in horrible ways. All twenty-two died.

Just before that, they dumped us in a camp. There wasn't anything in the barracks they dumped us in. However many there were off that ship that weren't hit. And the floor was lime, thick lime, and the walls were all limed, and I asked the guard what this was. We laid right down in it. Some of the Army guys had blankets, some didn't. We didn't. I didn't. I never had a blanket. They laid down in it and I asked the guard what happened and he said, "Yesterday power. They all died in the whole camp." British camp. He said they all died. I said there must be somebody. "No. Shinto." All dead. Oh, boy.

Then I sat down and I looked around the floor, whoever we got bedded down on the floor, and I thought maybe old Cameron, that was this doctor, maybe he was right. If this is going to go on and on I'm not so sure... I almost talked myself into just quitting. I don't know. I remembered something that happened when I was growing up, and probably my dad—he wasn't a quitter. He probably instilled that in me. That made me not want to give in to them. Not just want to live; that wasn't it, but not to give in to adversity. That was the closest I ever came, I think. Oh, my god, and when I saw these twenty-two people, I had nothing to help them with. I was sitting there in a cholera camp and a bunch of guys that had just died. I thought, Where is that? What is that? Also for a few days until they all died, the second day a guard came around and he brought me food and he had a venereal disease. Then when I got that knuckle on him, then it was easy. I ate better than any of the guys. He'd bring me bananas.

T: This was in Moline?

(2, B, 475)

A: Moline. He'd bring me bananas. He'd bring me Eagle Brand milk.

T: Where in the heck did he get that?

A: He got it from British stores, from before they capitulated. Some Eagle Brand milk and I'd open that. Stir it up. I gave it to the guys that could sip or drink something, but they all died. Believe me, I had my share because I made him go out and get some.

T: Is it an overstatement to say that being a medical person, a medic, during your prison experience saved your life?

A: Oh, that probably is overstating it, but not by far. I think it helped. I think it helped more from the standpoint of knowing what to do to myself. Like for instance, just brushing my teeth. I never put anything in my mouth and swallowed it that I didn't see boiled, and I didn't trust the next guy to boil it.

T: So you knew the importance of boiling.

A: I knew it. I knew it was clean and sterile. But some guys, really they brought their own death on themselves. Guys get hungry. They get thirsty. They'd hit a stream, and streams in Burma were like some of our streams are getting in this country. Dirty. You could see feces floating down there. Bathing in that stuff. I was afraid to put my head under water or splash it on my face. I saw some guys that got thirsty, and they'd dip into those and drink it. They'd pick up everything. Dysentery for sure. Sometimes cholera. That was a no no. From that standpoint, yes, I think having some medical knowledge helped. I couldn't do anything any other way. I got lucky too.

T: That's kind of my next question. What is the role of luck and chance?

A: Great. Luck is just about as big as you have. Just be where it isn't. That's where the bad stuff is. Even by accident or any other way. Stay out of it. Another thing was, people themselves are slow learners. And the first guy that got hit in the face from a Jap guard, I remember, he was a boxer. And this Jap hit him for little or nothing. They've got corporal punishment in their army themselves, so they hit each other. They hit old Zip, and Zip, he went down, and as soon as he got up, he was a fighter, he went to work on this Jap. He worked him over pretty good. The Jap had a gun. He took that gun away from him and just punched him out. Then they came over and they... Zip was never all right after that. They just beat him and beat him.

T: Didn't kill him?

A: No. Got close. They hung him upside down and stuff like that. I didn't think old Zip was ever all there after that. He didn't die in prison camp, but he died when he got out. Anyway, those kind of things. Guys weren't careful enough. They didn't protect themselves enough, and believe me, sometimes you can't rely on the next guy to help you or protect you. You just have to do it yourself. There's nobody around.

(2, B, 530)

T: This depending on yourself, other prisoner of war accounts say that depending on others was very important.

A: It was. These working parties were terribly important to me. You betcha. They'd steal for me, because I had no opportunity to steal myself.

T: Because you weren't out mixing with people.

A: Yes. I couldn't get on any ship to get some stores. They'd come in. They were searched every time they would come back in the camp, and they brought things in like a number ten can of peaches. American stuff. Big stuff. And G strings. I don't know how they did it (*laughs*). I tell you our guys got real good at all that.

T: The railroad construction in Burma lasted until about March of 1944, you said. Then you were suddenly taken to Saigon with a bunch of others?

A: They had groups that stayed there for maintenance on the railroads. Because when this railroad got done, there were two hundred-some bridges on it. One of them was the bridge on the River Kwai which, by the way, was the biggest. The movie "The Bridge on the River Kwai," that was a big lie. That was so untrue.

T: Now did you work on that bridge or on that piece...

A: I never physically worked on it myself, but I treated all the guys that worked on it every day.

T: How does the film differ from your experience?

A: A kid asked me almost that same question at Hastings when I was doing a speech down there. I said, "It's just about like it was over there, only we didn't have William Holden come in with the commandos." This kid looked at me kind of perplexed and I said, "I'm only kidding you." And he grinned. Those guys, those British soldiers there, like the colonel they beat to death, and all that stuff—they were all in full uniform. We never saw anything like that.

T: They looked healthy in the film too, I'll have to say.

A: And you never could see any ribs sticking out. Clean, some of them. Forget it. It didn't work that way. That was a big nothing.

T: Now when you watch a film like that, made in the mid-1950s, how do you respond to watching a film like that?

A: You just kind of laugh about it. It never disturbed me. I knew it was Hollywood. It just made me believe less in movies of all kinds. I wouldn't watch "Saving Private Ryan."

T: You haven't seen that film?

A: No.

T: But you weren't in the infantry. You weren't in Europe.

A: But I got to see more than they did, because it was either themselves in the infantry or the guy next to him that got butchered, and I saw them all. They brought them in in pieces. They say "Saving Private Ryan" was so real. I talked to a guy that was on the beach [at Normandy]. Actually was at Normandy, and he said, "That's real. That's just about the way it is." I don't need it. I've had enough of it. It served no useful purpose for me to watch stuff like that. Hey, I could tell them how to do it.

T: Al, you were in Burma and in Vietnam.

A: And Thailand.

T: How much contact did you have with the civilian population in those places?

A: Very little. I personally didn't have any. The work parties used to have some contact and they traded with them. The civilians would steal for them. I had very little, except on a grave detail. Sometimes I had to go out and help dig a grave when some American was buried. Then, usually being a French place, they usually had a bunch of sisters around or somebody like that that would get some priests that would help with the burial, and then they'd give you food. They'd bring out a big bunch of noodles. It didn't have too much in it. That's the only contact I had, and that was only one time in Saigon. Except the time I got caught trading, and then of course I got across the fence. I had a little contact there. But the guys on the working parties, they got in pretty good. There were a lot of French people in there, and the French knew Saigon backwards; they built Saigon.

In fact, some of our guys escaped and made it from there. One guy made it home and he asked me to go with as their medical advisor in case he got into trouble. I was scared to death. I knew this war was coming to a close pretty quick, and I wasn't going to push it.

T: Let me ask you about that. The war was on for years when you were in camp. How much were you aware of the larger picture of what was going on outside of your own situation?

A: The Japanese would pulverize us with propaganda. And they'd do it to their own troops. It was so untrue and so bad and their own troops, I guess, believed it, but a bunch of Americans, well... A guy flying, for instance, some ridiculous thing; the guy's up in an airplane and he saw this battleship, and he dived down on an American battleship and he reached out with his sabre and he chopped the captain's head off while he was flying by. That's the kind of propaganda they put.

T: With a straight face?

(2, B, 612)

A: With a straight face. It was in their papers and they'd give them to us to read and we read it. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out. One week they're in New Guinea, the next week they're going up the East Coast of New Guinea, and the next week they're in the southern Philippines. The next week they're going up towards Manila and taking that place. Then they're going to the Marianas and those islands. You don't have to be terribly smart to know what's going on. We were winning the war and we knew it. We had a radio on the Death Railway.

T: So during 1943-44, could you get dependable news occasionally?

A: You could, but it was a death offense if you even repeated it. We had our guys in G-strings in work parties. They'd come in and they made a radio. One guy, two guys made a radio. They brought in the foils and they brought in transistors in those days. But a simple radio, and they could pick up stations like Calcutta and get the BBC. That was good news. Then they put the radio—they were so deathly afraid of them that in our case they had one radio in the cookhouse. Fire was up here and then the Y-John was a big, wrought iron pot. Pig iron pot. And it sat on top of the poles, so they went in and dug a hole underneath the coals and kept the radio there. One guy would go down and sweat himself to death getting the news. Then they didn't give the news to everybody. Just certain people. I got mine second hand from a doctor that was entrusted. He gave it to me second hand because he could trust me. I don't think I ever repeated it to anybody else. This was the news from the BBC.

T: And you were able to at least compare what the Japanese were telling you with some semi-regular reports, outside news.

A: Yes. You know, it's just amazing, Thomas, in those places what you can do. It just hardly seems possible now when you look back at it. Like knowing those guys could bring a radio in, and put it together on a two by four and have a workable radio and bringing in big stations. BBC was big in those days. And then the other thing: rumors. I guess I mentioned that earlier. Guys would make up rumors just to keep the spirit going. Make them up. Then they'd embellish and they'd grow. And then they would get totally unbelievable.

T: They took on a life of their own?

A: Yes. But you know, you want to believe so bad that you kind of half believe it. Oh, there's a ship on the way here now. American Red Cross ship coming in with such and such. Bunch of Jap prisoners that they caught somewhere, from Iwo or the Philippines, and we're going to be traded. And it's on the way. It's practically here. And I really thought I half believed that. The other half I didn't believe, but you hope so hard that you don't want to deny it either.

Same way with food. You'd sit there and say, "When I get back out there's going to be chocolate malts and banana cream and big steaks, three inch steaks and all that good stuff we used to have." And some poor soul would sit there and say, "If you guys don't shut up I'm going to wipe you out." And he meant it. So the guys would shut up. Five minutes, ten minutes later the guy is talking about banana cream pie—the same one that got so disturbed. You almost feel like you had a meal when you get through a session like that.

T: Was food an obsession?

A: Yes. It was and it wasn't. You get hungry enough it became an obsession. You were obsessed with the thought of food. I think that's fair to say. You bet. So much so that's all you think about. Even at that age, and you know what young boys that age are thinking about—sex. That was not in your language at all.

T: There really was kind of a need hierarchy, then. A full belly comes first; and they weren't getting it.

A: It really does. I won't tell you what the next thing is after you get your belly full (*laughs*). Sex becomes very important, but I think it's right on the heels.

(2, B, 667)

T: A related subject: Was sex or homosexuality a problem in the camps here?

A: Some. And it was well known. Because for some reason or other you don't hide homosexuality in a place like that. You've got no clothes on. There's no way to hide. No privacy. I hope the British guys don't take any offense, but they were the worst offenders—if that's an offense.

T: Most active, shall we say.

A: Yes. It was. They'd walk around the camp hungry as hell, skinny as the rest of us. They'd hold hands and hug. That was their lifestyle, I guess they call it now. We used to think they were nuts.

T: Were these people looked down upon or discriminated against?

A: Yes. They were discriminated against and looked down on. Even in prison camp. Guys made fun of them. I was not natured to make fun ever of anybody and I was taught not to do that, but some people do it anyway. Do it openly and to the guys. That wasn't me. I thought it was terrible. I thought it was sick. That was my approach. This guy is mentally ill and leave him alone. In fact I don't come too far from thinking that way now.

T: But for you, it was their business.

A: Yes. I let them do what they want. If that's what keeps them alive. That was my business to keep them alive really.

T: Was violence between prisoners a problem?

A: Yes. But you know, I've read accounts of real bad violence where they killed each other. In fact, I think of the author Gavin Daws, in *Prisoners of the Japanese* [New York, 1994], he's got a paragraph in there from some prisoners, not from our area where I was, but where Americans were killing themselves.

T: Killed each other?

A: Killed each other. And no other nationality. I didn't experience any of that and I like Gavin Daws, his book. He researched it for years and he's a good writer. Published a lot of stuff before that. I think it's the best book I've read on prisoners of war.

T: So from your perspective he captures what your life was like.

A: Yes, he really does. And from his interviews what you were doing. I think he did such a good job.

T: He talked to a bunch of guys who were *Houston* survivors I know for that book.

A: He did. Some guys I know of course, real well. If I'd have lived in Texas when he was doing the Texas thing, I'd have gone in that book.

T: Al, what kind of violence did you witness between prisoners? Were there cliques or groups?

A: Yes. Kind of like we used to call high school girls, you know having their little disagreements. Little clans. Some of the guys were real scroungers and some sold food and some traded. Go out and get cigarettes of some description. Especially at this Changi camp at Singapore. If you know of a title of a book that's called *King Rat* [by James Clavell, 1962]. A lot of that is the truth. They had a big deal in Singapore. Changi was so big that they [Japanese] couldn't possibly patrol it all without having half a battalion in there. They went out and actually traded with natives. It wasn't bad. But there again, you'd have to get your hands on it, because of the cliques that were there before you. Mostly British. In fact the British they still owned Changi after...

T: Even though they were now inside and not outside.

A: Funny thing. Actually they had these kangaroo trials and the British were awfully good at discipline and keeping it. Much better than the Americans. Because of the

discipline. But they kind of overdid it. When we got to Singapore our guys were hungry as the rest of them and they couldn't get at the cliques to get extra food. The British had it all, what there was. So they would find other ways. The officers had chickens running around loose and the Americans would go in there and steal a chicken or two and eat it. They actually had their own trials. And one day they had an American on trial in there. A little kangaroo court set up to their own soldiers, so the guy had it coming. He should have been on trial. Then they worded it like you were stealing a king's property. The Japanese had overrun the place for months. They were still doing those things. I suppose it was all in the system. It was all part of the discipline and part of keeping the guys alive. I think they did a much better job than we did.

T: As far as discipline. Now you talk a lot about how people acted and reacted. From your perspective, did the prison and camp experience bring out the best in human nature or the worst?

A: Sometimes both.

T: What's an example of the best?

A: The best is guys sticking their necks out. Some of the officers particularly. They got more beatings than anybody because they were responsible for the guys. For instance, they wanted us to take an oath not to desert. That's a big one in the British army. This British Army officer said, "That's not going to happen. We've had it in our laws, our army stuff for years and you're not going to take it out. It's our duty. We're sworn. When we go in, we raise our hands, we swore to escape if we became a prisoner of war." And the Japs quit feeding us and they beat him, and beat him, and beat him. And he kept saying the same thing. They'd still be beating him if we hadn't said, "Hey, we'll sign it." The other British officers and us got together and said, "Hey, under duress it doesn't matter what you sign. So, sign it." We signed it. That's what I thought would (***)

T: What's the worst in human nature that came out through these experiences?

A: Selfishness, and not wanting to do anything for the guy next to him. The guy that had better food. Like *King Rat*. Sell it. Not give it to him at all. Hoard it. And not helping the guy next to you who's starving, going to die. It's the worst. And it happened. It happened. I always thought, and maybe I was just biased, that the Americans did the best job at that. They're pretty good sharers.

T: It sounds like from your perspective the British and the Americans, although in the same situation, culturally reacted in different ways.

A: They sure did.

T: Was there friction between British and Americans?

A: Yes. There was a lot. Not as far as I was concerned. Individually, I got some of the best friends among the British. Jim Whittaker is one of them. This guy was from England. There were quite a lot of them. But collectively they're different and that's what most Americans can't stand. Difference. They had different habits, and I'd have to say even when things got available, in Saigon they got to be available better, that the guys in the British army don't bathe. Personal hygiene is not as good. Americans are nuts about everything. Personal hygiene. Over scrub their teeth. Go to France and England right now. That's why France makes all the perfumes *(laughs)*.

T: Let me switch a little bit. When did you start to figure that the Japanese were likely going to lose the war?

A: I thought that from day one, really.

T: When did it become apparent that the end of the war was going to come fairly soon?

A: They always liked to give us bad news, and we heard that President Roosevelt died.

T: That's April 1945.

A: Yes.

T: You were in Saigon now, right?

A: Yes. We already knew that because they were bombing us every day there in Saigon. And they didn't bomb us so much because of our camp. So we figured they had to go down there, and they did. We knew then it was getting close. And then the British and the French. There were Free French there. They had them blocked off. But they had access to lots of radios. They knew everything that was happening, and they conveyed it to us at Saigon. I'd say that from the time I got into Saigon where you could really build your hopes --

End of Tape 2. Tape 3, Side A begins at counter 000.

T: It was late 1944 when you got into Saigon. By that time you figured things had turned.

A: Yes. I thought things were lining up. Because you got so much more. You got nothing in particular out in the jungle except those few words from the radio under the cookhouse, and you were just so scared to spread it around. You didn't even know whether that was true. In Saigon we saw so many evidences of the Americans. What news you got they were marching on them. They were just coming on strong.

Then we had another kind of fear, the Japanese were telling us every day of our lives in there that they were going to kill us if the Americans ever came by, or the Allies ever came across. They killed a lot of captives. In the Philippines they wiped out 185 POWs [in December 1944 on the island of Palawan]. Poured oil in the trenches, burning them. This is documented. They were going to kill all the prisoners before they could be bombed. We wouldn't be having this conversation if they hadn't...

T: You think the dropping of the atomic bomb and the rapid end of the war against Japan saved your life.

A: Very definitely. I think all of them, because they were set to even fight on the ground and then kill us piecemeal anyway. But they didn't want any prisoners back. Some guys got... Tojo got hanged for it. That was one of the things.

T: How did you in this camp in Saigon become aware that the war had ended?

A: We had all these news messages, real ones and rumors. They had this plane flying to Manila with the peace people and Japanese officers and American officers. Sitting down at tables and signing a peace agreement. We had the details. Painted green plane so nobody would shoot at it. Then one day a plane came over Saigon. He was dropping leaflets.

T: American plane?

A: Yes. It was a B-24 Liberator. Dropping leaflets over the camp.

T: They knew where your camp was.

A: Yes. They dropped them over there (*points in distance*) but unfortunately there was enough breeze and not a single leaflet fell in the camp. But the Vietnamese, they put a leaflet on a little rock and pitched it into the camp. Then the Japs told us they were going to shoot us if we read it. But we read it. It was General Whitameyer. He said, "Stand by. The war is over." It didn't say will be over. It said it's over. We'll be back.

T: This was after 14 August.

A: Yes. We were in there until September 6. I don't know. We picked up leaflets. We were tickled to death. And they dropped some off on the Japs. The Japs were firing at them. They, in that many words, they would be dropping leaflets tomorrow. Coming over. The next day they came again, and they dropped more leaflets, but they dropped people. They dropped paratroopers.

(3, A, 70)

T: So American paratroopers were dropped into your camp?

A: Yes. They had read that they [Japanese] were going to kill all the prisoners. They knew that, so they dropped a whole bunch of paratroopers. Even their Jeep. They dropped one Jeep. This guy came up to the camp. Great big tall man. He must have been six and a half foot. With a beard. He had a carbine slung over his shoulder and he had ammunition all around and hand grenades. He had the whole works. He came up to the gate and he rattled it, and he had full colonel's insignia. He rattled the gate and he said, "Let me in." The Japs were kind of frozen. They didn't know whether they should shoot at him or not. They must have known the war was over too. People told them. But they didn't open the gate either. They didn't shoot and they didn't open the gate. Finally he used some real roughy words. "You sons of bitches! The war is over." He talked to them like a woodsman. He pulled a hand grenade out and said, "I'll open it if somebody doesn't." The sergeant ran over and he quickly opened it. He walked in. He had a lot of guts, because those Japs were firing. We thought they were going to kill him, because that's all they had done to us for years. He ran up to this guy and he must have knocked him twenty feet. He rolled him right away. Big guy. Turned out he was a sergeant. He wasn't a full colonel at all. He said, "Don't pay any attention to these. I'm a buck sergeant." He was tough. A regular Army guy.

T: That was the first American you saw, then?

A: The first American we saw. Big ugly guy. Oh, man. I told him, I said, "I'm about to kiss you." He said, "As ugly as I am?" or something like that. "Nobody wants to kiss me." We flew from Saigon down to Calcutta.

T: Did American planes land there in Saigon to pick you up?

A: Yes. They were all front liners. And they were all flying C-130s. Transport planes, and cumbersome. No seats in them. Just a bench along each side lengthwise. We got on those. And those kids. I looked at them and I couldn't believe it—they all looked like they were eighteen. They were volunteers. They had to be unmarried and something else. Unmarried for sure. I remember that. The guy told me. They had a lot of freedom. In wartime it's a lot different. Can you imagine a pilot, even from Northwest, getting drunk and hung-over for the next day?

T: They arrest them and take their license away.

A: These guys, these front liners, kids. Gutsy guys. They would have three, four whiskey bottles in the cockpit. They were passing them around to us. That was another time I used my head. I wouldn't drink any of that. I wouldn't touch it. I told the guys. A couple did. Took some swigs out of it. I said, "You guys are asking for it." But these guys, the flyers, they were drinking when we were on the ground and they were drinking in the air. Then a Jap started firing at us from the ground. The interior Japanese that were out of Saigon, different outposts, they didn't know

whether they should or not. I guess they hadn't got the order. Here are these puffs of smoke coming up around us.

T: The war was clearly over by now.

A: For thirty days. So I said, "Hey, those guys are still firing at us!" So one of the guys said "Huh! They are!" There were eighteen or twenty guys. "Let's see if they'll run." He put down on this gun position and they did run. You could just see little streaks of Japanese going from the gun. He straightened out and on to Calcutta. Get us out of here.

T: Before you got on the plane, how did the treatment you got from the Japanese change once V-J came the middle of August there?

A: They were cowed into the corner.

T: You noticed different treatment from them?

A: Well, no. They were still beating us for a while. But once the sergeant got there, it changed; they were cowards. But you know what? They were still beating us up from August 14 to September 5.

T: So from your perspective there wasn't a real change in how they treated you?

A: No. Gradually the food got better at Saigon. But apparently the average soldier, I think they were soldiers, it struck me that way, that hey, they're prisoners of war. You just kill them when you're done with them. That's all. But the food was better, and I suppose the officer said we got more rice and occasionally a hunk of meat.

T: Where did the Americans, these paratroopers, come from?

A: These flyers? Some from the China-Burma-India Theater. CBI. They were all Army Air Corps.

T: Was there any retribution against the Japanese guards when they got there?

A: Yes. The sergeant bashed one of them right away. And they took some guys away. I wasn't going to look to see what happened to them. Some guy said they took them out in the jungle and shot them. I don't know if they did. I wouldn't say they did, because I'd have to see it. I didn't think any Americans would do that. Then again, you don't know about people that just come out of action, what they'd do.

(3, A, 163)

T: As you left the camp and flew to Calcutta, what were your feelings towards the Japanese?

A: I disliked them very intensely. I had the feeling you should never trust them ever again because they were just not trustworthy. They lied and cheated and mistreated. I don't feel very much different towards the Japanese today, and I don't care if they are two generations younger. I don't think they'd probably be as bad nowadays but I think this ruthless, killer instinct in them is just inherent.

T: The attitude you had has really not worn off or changed substantially?

A: Not really. I wouldn't trust them with anything civilian now. You wouldn't ever see me buy a Japanese car. You'd never see me buy a Japanese TV if you could get an American one (*laughs*).

T: Traveling to Japan?

A: I have no desire unless I went over there with intent to do some bodily harm. I think I overstated that a little bit. I don't want to go over there and beat them up.

T: But you don't want to go either.

A: No way.

T: Just thinking about things and attitudes to people, would you say that during your time in these camps, were you a philosopher thinking about bigger issues of life and your place in it?

A: Yes. I think about those things. I really got a lot of empathy from people generally. I don't know if that exactly included the Japanese. I could feel at times just like when we were out in the jungle. I mentioned a little of it before. Even their guards, as mean as they were, they had an awful life. They had to be in a constant state of disorganized mess themselves. They had no liberty, no leave. They had no place to go except back on the railroad the same day with the prisoners, and beat on them. I could feel something for them. I actually, after the war, after our people came in and the guards were cowering in the corner, I felt a little sorry for them. It felt kind of like if you hit a dog. You hit an animal. Particularly a dog. A dog really shows feelings if you're mean to him. That's about the level I had, though.

T: Al, what happened once you got to Calcutta?

A: That was a great experience. We got there, and here's the Army. They were liberating these people all the time. They were bringing them in from various places. The first thing was, we had no clothes of course. We were still in the stuff we had.

T: Which was basically nothing.

A: Yes. G-string. They had Army khakis ready for us. Every size. And they had a de-louser. Just a chamber and, hey, that was almost like they were trying to kill us (*laughs*). You get in one of those de-lousers and that mask leaks a little bit. It's a vapor. They shoot it and they close all the doors and you were in there for it seems like fifteen or twenty minutes, and I suppose it was too. Guys are coughing and upchucking. If you had a little leak in them it burned. I finally got out of there. Then they gave us these khakis. Well, we showered, then they gave us these khaki uniforms. Army khakis. Didn't matter what rank. They never even asked you. They just handed you one that would maybe fit. That was fine. I looked real sharp. Then they said, "We're going to feed you." We went over to this chow line. They had ham in this line. They had turkey in this line. They had steak in this line. You name it. Potatoes and fruit. Oh, my God!

When we got on the plane, these crazy drinkers up there, they had K rations. And the soldiers hated them, because they lived on them so much. But we saw that chocolate and we went nuts. I was so full of that K ration chocolate when I got to Calcutta I was sick to my stomach. Then comes these chow lines. You know how much you could eat there. I tasted everything. Some of the guys actually went outside, put their finger down their throat and upchucked and they'd go back in.

T: For more food?

A: Yes. I couldn't cotton that (*laughs*). That was Calcutta. That was already September 6 or 7.

(3, A, 231)

T: Did you stay in Calcutta very long?

A: Yes. We stayed five or six days. But we complained so much they had to get us on a plane. Then they took us to New York, to St. Albans Hospital.

T: By ship or by plane?

A: We flew. We weren't long getting there. My US friends and the Dutch. My good friend from England, he never got home until Christmas. They waited for ships, there in India. No, I mean in Saigon. They stayed right in Saigon.

T: They kept them in Saigon?

A: Yes. Yes.

T: So you got out faster than the British.

A: Oh, way faster. Jim Whittaker, who was in the British Army, he never got out until it was just a few days before Christmas.

T: You were in New York by the end of September '45, then?

A: Oh, yes.

T: How long were you in a hospital?

A: Ten days at the outside. I had like ninety days leave. And we were supposed to spend time in the hospital. But they had a kind of an unwritten rule, the commanding officer did in the hospital, they couldn't lock up a prisoner of war unless it was death, unless he killed someone. Nothing happened. No confinement. So the guys would just go home anyway. So they let them.

T: Did you go home as well, to North Dakota?

A: Yes. I went home.

T: Did you contact your family from Calcutta?

A: The Red Cross did.

T: They knew you were alive then.

A: That's the first they knew. I still have the telegram.

T: What was it like seeing your family again when you got back to North Dakota?

A: I got a sister that's, let's see, she was about thirty... she was born in 1933, and she was three when I left home in 1937. And she was a big girl, she was twelve. I said, Who is that gal? It was my sister. She had literally grown up. And my mother of course, she was very happy. She cried. And my dad, he was the true German. He was... (*trails off*). I didn't have his nature at all. I had my mother's. She was a really the softy. My dad was kind of... I always say when I speak to guys that I've known quite a while, I tell them he was a tyrant. He was just too much. He was very, very strict. In fact, to the point of, nowadays they'd lock him up I think. Abusive. But I didn't know. That was no big deal then...

My folks... on my mother's side they weren't, but on his side they were just the same. His dad, my grandfather, was a Russian Army officer. He came from Germany, but they made him an Army officer. He was really a guy. Heard all kinds of stories about him. I didn't ever know him. Didn't want to.

T: So you spent how long at home then once you got there?

A: On leave? I had ninety days and more. You could almost request any amount and they'd let you. They didn't pay too much attention to it.

T: You were still in the Navy. While you were home there, how did you adjust to being back at a place you knew many years ago?

A: You got right back in the groove. I came home one day and the next day, it was the fall of year like now and it's on a farm and the Germans raise a lot of potatoes, and they were out digging potatoes. My sister was out there and my younger brother. And my dad. He gave me a fork and said, "We're digging potatoes." I dug potatoes.

T: Welcome home.

(3, A, 285)

A: Yes *(laughs)*. That's a true story. I went up to him and I said, "Dad, I don't like this any better than when I left. I don't like it now. Here you are." *(outstretched arm, like handing back fork)* So I didn't dig potatoes. The hell with it.

T: You had to do some more Navy time, though. In Chicago, until your discharge.

A: Yes. I was in the hospital.

T: How did you readjust to being still in the Navy, but stationed Stateside?

A: I don't know. Some of the guys didn't. Some of the guys were kind of old that stayed in the service. I don't know. I'm easy to adjust to most any situation. I adjusted to Navy life fine. And if they wanted to transfer me back overseas I'd have been there until I was ready to retire.

T: You had ten years by the time you got out, in 1947.

A: Yes.

T: When you became a civilian in 1947, or even before you became a civilian, how did you process your POW experience and move on?

A: In the first year I guess I did a lot of partying.

T: Did you? While you were still in the Navy?

A: Yes. Drank whiskey to beat hell. In the Navy and out of the Navy. Even after I got out. And we were already married and I was still doing too much of it. We were married in 1946, in September. But anyway, before that, we'd party. First of all we were stationed briefly at Wold-Chamberlain Field, here in Minneapolis. We didn't

work. We just had a good time. That's where I met my wife, because she worked down there.

T: Were you drinking to forget about things?

A: I don't know. I think I was just doing that to be free. I didn't need it. I wasn't trying to cover up anything. That never bothered me a whole lot. In fact my whole experience didn't have any... I didn't ever think about it too much. We had money. We were young and we had missed that so long. We just did too much partying. But it didn't last all that long.

T: Did you sort of feel you were trying to catch up on the years that you had missed?

A: Maybe unconsciously. I never felt conscious about it. I figured there was a lot of future ahead. When you're young you think you'll live forever.

T: Speaking of living forever, was there a sense for you after surviving all that that you can survive anything and nothing's going to get you?

A: Yes. I thought like the guy said in the trenches, a fatalist, American bombers are over us dropping bombs all over us threatening to hit us. One guy wouldn't stick his head out of there. His sergeant told him, "Get your head down!" He said, "I'm a fatalist. I think when my time comes God will take me in his arms and carry me to heaven." The sergeant said, "You goddamn fool! He also gave you a head! Use it!" That was the end of the fatalist. Really, I can adjust to a lot of things. It kind of bugs me when people can't, because it's so easy to do. You can adjust to so many situations and not be miserable by just adjusting.

T: Did that personality trait help you along the way?

A: It did all my life. In prison camp as well as out.

T: The inflexible guys must have had a hell of a time.

A: Oh, yes. They did. For the most part they didn't get back. They couldn't adjust to a prison camp. You can't live in a place like that if you don't. It's hard enough if you do.

T: Yes. Because prison camp doesn't adjust to you.

A: That's exactly right. I used to be kind of a hothead. When I was young I could fly off the handle for no reason.

T: How about after?

A: Not much. I had some when we were first married. I'd get mad, but we never had a major argument. It's so silly. You could talk yourself into not arguing. You can talk yourself into it (*laughs*).

T: Do you think that your prison experience then helped put life in perspective?

A: I think so. I tell you, I wouldn't take the Defense Budget amount for the experience. But you could give me that amount and I wouldn't go back (*laughs*).

(3, A, 344)

T: Al, what was the hardest thing for you readjusting to the civilian world again?

A: Nothing really. It was trying to make some money and making a life for yourself. That's the way the 1950s were. We were young and we had lost these years. And you'd look around and see a guy your age that wasn't in the war, which were darned few. But the farmers, a lot of them were deferred, and they made it. Their financial status was kind of like middle life. And boy, you hadn't got a start yet. So you gotta scratch and get past them or get with them. That was always my thinking about it. I didn't look back and say, "Well...", or get mad at the country. It's so easy. I think this is the greatest country in the whole world, and I've been to a lot of places. There's nobody comes even close except maybe Canada and England. But you look back, and a lot of guys did, and I'll show you some rosters down there—you wouldn't want to see them. There's forty, fifty, sixty guys. And the next year after 1945, '46, '47, gunshot wounds, self-inflicted.

T: Killed themselves?

A: Yes. Prisoners. Guys that I had been with in camp. Couldn't adjust to being a civilian again. Couldn't adjust to living, I guess.

T: How does that make you feel when you see guys who you had seen as survivors suddenly...

A: My first reaction, you've got to feel sorry for them, or else they were damn fools. Or both. But you have to feel sorry for them, because nobody would take their own life if they're all there. I think you have to have something wrong in your head to commit suicide. But you saw that plenty of times. Quite a lot of them. That's amazing. There's all these gunshot wounds, and then you don't even count the car wrecks. I just have the feeling that some of those were brought on.

T: So guys really unable to handle the...

A: Couldn't handle it. One of my very best friends, his name was Bill Denton, he became a thorough alcoholic. He died two years ago. He couldn't handle it at all. He could have had stuff. He was so good. Same guy I slapped around the face. Real

good friend. After he got pretty well in prison camp and we could get some time to talk, he was forever telling me about his marriage to this gal. Her name was Alfreda, and I heard Alfreda one hundred fifty thousand times. He was always talking about her and you know, he got back to the docks and he had a twin brother and they looked exactly alike. Both nice looking guys. Good family. He got back to the New York docks. His twin brother met him and Bill looked around and said, "Where's Alfreda?" and he said, "I haven't really talked about that." She got remarried.

T: She thought he was gone.

A: Yes. He thought he was going to meet her on the docks. I guess Bill never got over it. He started drinking like a fish and never stopped. His whole life. He married about three times, and about three times he was just leveled. Which wasn't... people do it nowadays like crazy, but they didn't then. But he just never got over it and the day he died... he ended up in a nursing home. They'd give him a drink in there...

A: He never got over it. Just stayed an alcoholic. He'd get dried up like they say, and he had a lot of places where they send guys. They'd sent him out and less than a week later he was back in the sauce. Never recovered.

T: A last question. Al, what do you think is the most important way that the war and your POW experience changed your life?

A: Oh, I think I learned a lot. I think I probably learned so much more than I would have if I hadn't been there, because it was an experience that I wouldn't connect with any other way. I think you learn a lot of tolerance in a place like that for other people. To tolerate them. I think you become better for managing for yourself and the guys around you. I don't think I'm the wisest guy in the world, but I got smarter along the way. I think that was good for you. And you look back and you think, hey, when you die, and we all do that, you can say well, I did something. I tried. I tried as hard as I could. You'd like to think you saved a few lives, which was very important. I'm almost positive I did that. There were a lot of them like that. You left the world a little better than you found it. Maybe that was part of the reason.

T: That's the last question I have. Anything else you want to add before we conclude?

A: No. I'm so windy, I think.

T: On the record I'll thank you very much.

A: You bet.

END OF INTERVIEW